

Postcolonial Performances

iMumbo Jumbo: The Days of Miracle and Wonder. Written, directed and designed by Brett Bailey. Perf. Third World Bunfight. Barbican International Theatre Experience, London. 15 July 2003.

Those waiting for the performance of *iMumbo Jumbo: The Days of Miracle and Wonder* by the South African company Third World Bunfight in London's Barbican theatre found themselves in an atmosphere unlikely to be repeated in other West End venues that evening. As the audience entered the auditorium and found their seats, the actors on the stage seemed to be already engaged in a ceremony: some women were wafting sweetgrass smoke towards the audience; other men and women were drumming and chanting; still others danced. All of this before the performance began!

iMumbo Jumbo tells a story that begins with Hinsta kaPhalo, a Xhosa king murdered in 1836 when he attempted to escape from British troops. He ended up being buried without his head, which was taken as a grisly souvenir, a not uncommon colonial practice that combined humiliation of an enemy with the desire for exotic collections. A century and half later in 1992 Xhosa chief Nicholas Tilana Gcaleka began to have dreams suggesting that Hinsta's restless spirit, angry about the disembodied burial, was the cause of the violence and crime haunting South Africa. Guided by the Hurricane spirit, Hinsta traveled to England to search for the skull and bring it home for honourable burial. To summarize the story in this way, however, gives little sense of the intensity of the performance by Third World Bunfight. Hinsta's quest is told through music, dancing and chanting. Songs draw on traditional Transvaal chants, musical theatre, and South African and Zimbabwean gospels. Actors often wear traditional masks, a performance strategy that, at least for a western audience, gives dynamic animation to an

object often seen only in museum glass cabinets. The stories and performance traditions of Africa structure the entire play and are adopted in innovative ways to comment on contemporary issues. When the South African visitors arrive in London, for instance, the reporters of Britain's SKY television are portrayed by actors wearing masks of cameras. Such a defamiliarizing image of the camera—its lenses become probing eyes and noses all at once—not only foregrounds the metaphorical masks worn in western public spaces, but also draws attention to the “life” with which media images are endowed. Third World Bunfight describes their project in this way: “Our works dig deep beneath the surface of post-colonial Africa: we explore sensitive and contentious issues, and dramatise them in ways that valorize and celebrate the extraordinary wealth of cultural modes available here” (program). The result is a combination of enthralling performance, contemporary history and wry humour. When the Queen of England is portrayed by a Black actress, in resplendent African dress, speaking in a British upper-class accent and clutching a china figurine of a Corgi, the overdeterminations of postcolonial mimicry can scarcely be missed.

While rooted in African legends, histories, music, song and performance *iMumbo Jumbo* raises general questions that are crucial for post-colonial studies. Throughout the centuries of global expansion, the museums, institutions and individuals from colonizing nations were engaged in a process of amassing collections of ‘exotic’ objects that were purchased or simply stolen from colonized peoples. At the most basic level, these appropriations remove objects from the lifeworld in which they have significance, consigning them to a sterile existence in glass cabinets. From another perspective, the transfer of objects results in a diminishing and dishonouring of the cultures of the colonized. This humiliation is as true of an ordinary bowl whose carved or painted patterns will no longer be felt by hands offering food to a family as it is of a sacred totem whose place within spiritual ceremonies will no longer be enacted. Within such contexts the skull of Hinsta is a powerful and poignant image that functions as both personal degradation (the dismemberment of a human body, the deliberate insult to rites and ceremonies of burial) and as a metonymy for the millions of humiliations, small

and large, suffered by colonized peoples over centuries of domination. The simplicity of Gcaleka's discovery of the skull—the Hurricane spirit leads him to a farm in Scotland where it is simply handed to him—is indeed a moment of “miracle and wonder” that represents an important reclamation of dignity. Of course, the return and reburial of Hinsta's skull does not end crime and violence in South Africa. Third World Bunfight comments that “within the complex social landscape of rural South Africa the reaffirmation of Zhusa traditions and ancestral values that Gcaleka longed for was doomed...” (program). It is, nevertheless, a small step towards constructing new African stories that reverse narratives of colonial supremacy.

Third World Bunfight is an innovative theatre company based in Capetown. Founded in 1996, the company has performed throughout rural and urban South Africa and Zimbabwe. Other productions include *Big Dada: The Rise and Fall of Idi Amin*, an examination of the disastrous factionalism, power brokering and suffering in Uganda under Amin and *MacBeth: An African Opera adapted from the Verdi*, an opera that takes Shakespeare's play into contemporary Africa, with music by European and African instruments. A crucial commitment of the company is its dedication to an all-Black performing company and to the training of actors from impoverished backgrounds. It is significant to note that in terms of other diversity issues (disability, for instance), Third World Bunfight puts into action what many companies in western countries, with access, one suspects, to more resources, are still discussing. “Art,” the company comments in the *iMumbo Jumbo* program, “can be a powerful spiritual source. It is artists who give form to the Spirit of humanity, and it is up to artists to protect that Spirit against the dehumanizing numbness that surrounds us.” Although the vocabulary here (“spirit” and “humanity”) might seem to situate these conceptions of performance within traditional discourses on the role of art, quite the opposite is true. Art and performance are acts of resistance against modes of domination that can be as different as the daily humiliations of life in the struggle to survive in relentless poverty or the mindlessly repetitive glass and concrete cities of an increasingly globalized world.

It is important to stress that Third World Bunfight alters its performances in different contexts. In his book, *Voices of Justice and Reason*, Geoffrey V. Davis describes a performance of *iMumbo Jumbo* in a Cape Town township recreation hall that incorporated quite distinct strategies: the audience sat on bales of hay or on the floor; many local residents from children to a church choir took part in the performance; small children moved through the audience offering Coca-cola and fruit (306). The London performance was presented by a smaller troupe of about twenty actors; the audience, of course, sat in the plush seats of the Barbican theatre. Some of the ceremonies and rituals in the South African performance—the sacrifice of a hen, for instance—would have been inappropriate in London. The actor playing the Hurricane spirit in the Barbican theatre gently teased the metropolitan audience by inviting them to sing and clap, and then slipping in the reminder that “white people and educated Black people don’t like to get involved.” And later, when Hinsta’s skull was finally returned, women actors offered the audience drinks of liquor in small paper cups, a gesture of celebration that many in the audience accepted. These divergences in the performances amply demonstrate Third World Bunfight’s ability to alter their script and acting in different situations. For the South African audience *iMumbo Jumbo* might be—I am able only to speculate—a retelling history from a perspective rooted in Xhosa culture and an enactment of utopian desires for redressing the brutalities of the colonial past. For the London audience *iMumbo Jumbo* is perhaps less about the reclamation of history than about a process of developing awareness of diverse stories and styles of storytelling.

Davis comments that in portraying the sufferings of colonialization and apartheid Third World Bunfight draws on established traditions of township drama. The company, he goes on to say, has engaged the profound political alterations of the 1990s; it has committed itself to training and developing Black performers from non-traditional backgrounds. Their exceptional accomplishment has initiated “new forms of African community theatre” (308) that provide an astonishing experience for anyone interested in postcolonial cultural forms.

Further information about Third World Bunfight is available on their website <www.thirdworldbunfight.co.za>

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Works Cited

Davis, Geoffrey V. *Voices of Justice and Reason: Apartheid and Beyond in South African Literature*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2003.

Program of *iMumbo Jumbo: The Days of Miracle and Wonder*. Written, directed and designed by Brett Bailey. Perf. Third World Bunfight. Not paged.

Note: 'Postcolonial Performances' introduces a new section in ARIEL that will report on new performance art and drama of interest to post-colonial studies. Performances are often discussed only locally; in initiating this section ARIEL hopes to widen awareness about important and spirited performance art taking place all over the world.